

April 4, 2019

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

We are a diverse group of advocates for religious liberty for all. We sometimes differ about what religious freedom requires, but we are united around the bedrock principle of ensuring that all individuals and communities are able to exercise their faith in safety and security. We write to ask you to take action to uphold this principle.

We are grieving over the most recent heinous attacks on houses of worship. The March 15th attack on two mosques in New Zealand during Friday prayer killed fifty Muslims and injured fifty more. In the weeks since, an assailant stabbed a Catholic priest in a Montreal church during Mass, and a California mosque was set on fire and vandalized with graffiti referencing the New Zealand attacks. Moreover, to our alarm, in the aftermath of the New Zealand attacks we have seen the Jewish community falsely accused as somehow being responsible for those attacks—rhetoric that further endangers that community as well.

As you know, other houses of worship have also been targeted for unspeakable violence in recent years. In the United States, these attacks include ones on Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek; Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, Minnesota; First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas; and Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The words we use matter greatly, especially the words of our leaders. In 1790, President George Washington wrote a letter to the members of Touro Synagogue, insisting that the government of the United States must give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . . .” All Americans should be able to “sit in safety under [their] own vine[s] and figtree[s],” with “none to make [them] afraid,” Washington said.

We ask you to uphold these principles. As governmental leaders, you have a special duty to ensure that your words comport with the spirit of the Constitution and help to unify, strengthen and keep Americans safe.

Accordingly, we ask you to affirm the following principles in coming days:

- Individuals of all faiths and none have equal dignity, worth and rights to religious freedom.
- A person is not more or less American because of his or her faith. People of all faiths and none are equal and make outstanding contributions to the United States.
- Individuals must be able to exercise their religion, including attending their houses of worship and practicing their faith in the public square, without fear for their physical safety.

- Scapegoating, stereotyping and spreading false information about any person or community, including religious individuals and communities, is unacceptable.
- Americans should never foment fear about groups based on attributes like religion, race or ethnicity, and they should speak against fear-mongering by others.
- The civic and religious virtue of humble dialogue with those with whom one disagrees should be encouraged.
- Leaders should avoid using violent imagery because it can encourage violence, especially among those who are so inclined and those who are impressionable.
- An attack on one religion should be treated as an attack on every faith. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

We hope you will devote specific remarks to these principles in the days ahead. We vow to work with you to ensure that individuals and communities are able to practice their faith without fear.

Sincerely,

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